

Theme Issue

Imagining a Prosperous Socialist Nation: Human-Centered Approaches in North Korean Studies

Guest Editor's Introduction

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For over eight decades, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has remained one of the most enigmatic and frequently misinterpreted states in the world. Although the country has been analyzed through diverse interpretive frameworks throughout its history, public discourse has predominantly emphasized its missile programs and human rights violations, often coupled with a fixation on sensationalized accounts of its leadership.

In this context, what is there to gain from redirecting the focus from the political leadership to the North Korean people? Adopting a humanized perspective offers the potential to enrich and expand understandings of the DPRK's national identity, challenging entrenched narratives and exploring new horizons of inquiry. Cognizant of the reality that North Korean people rarely have the opportunity to conduct or publish unconstrained research into their own culture and society, we seek to give a platform to the voices of ordinary North Korean people, gleaned from domestically produced media. Since the establishment of the DPRK state in 1948, North Korean society has undergone numerous profound transformations. Despite widespread portrayals of it as an immutable monolith cut off from the global community, compelling evidence reveals dynamic shifts in its cultural practices, policy paradigms, and political structures, both historically and in contemporary contexts.

In light of ongoing conflicts around the globe—including the involvement of North Korean troops in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the martial law crisis in

South Korea, and the frozen political dynamics between the two Koreas—comprehending the ethos, demeanor and mindset of North Koreans has become more pressing than ever. It is imperative for analysts and researchers to embrace more balanced and human-faced approaches to studying the DPRK, examining how the country has sought to carve out a distinct trajectory, particularly during the Cold War, while also diverging from the paths of other socialist states. Since the last significant moment of inter-Korean rapprochement five years ago, the DPRK has persistently worked to assert its sovereign presence on the world stage, capturing global attention and maintaining a visible role in international politics.

Acknowledging as much, this special issue, entitled “Imagining a Prosperous Socialist Nation: Human-Centered Approaches in North Korean Studies,” delves into the human dimensions of this perplexing yet profoundly multifaceted society, spanning its earliest years to the present day. The primary aim of the articles gathered herein is to provide a nuanced and balanced depiction of the DPRK that goes beyond the dominant discourse, which has fixated on high politics. With this ambition in mind, the special issue spotlights a diverse array of cultural and societal domains, both aligning with and, at times, challenging the prevailing negative discourse surrounding North Korea’s party line.

Through in-depth analyses of cultural and social elements such as music, cinema, disability conditions, and mega-events, the special issue shifts focus from the DPRK leadership to the lived experiences of North Korean citizens. Central to this exploration are the evolving dynamics of the country’s visual culture and soundscape. The articles included in this issue scrutinize historical facets of cinematography as well as the foundational elements of music during the critical formative period of 1945–1949. Another substantial axis of inquiry concerns the DPRK’s treatment of youth, addressing both theoretical models and practical implementations. The contributors investigate the state’s approach to supporting children with disabilities through educational policies, and dissect the modes by which the subjectivities of youth and students have been framed and projected to the international community.

The majority of the articles featured in this special issue were initially presented at the Sixteenth Kyujanggak International Symposium on Korean Studies, held on November 2, 2023, at the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies (KIKS) in Seoul. The symposium panel, titled “The North Korea We Know? DPRK Mass Culture from Cinema and Disability Policies to Functional Architecture and Music,” was hosted by Professor Sang Hwan Seong, Director of Seoul National University’s International Center for Korean Studies at KIKS. Extending from the aims of the panel, this special issue remains committed to

broadening the scope of sources and methodologies employed to grapple with North Korea in all its intricacies, offering readers a richer, more comprehensive understanding of the DPRK's cultural and social landscape.

With its roaring choruses, catchy light music ensembles, and booming loudspeakers, it would be difficult to get a real feel of North Korean culture and society without confronting its music. Most previous studies of DPRK music, however, have been preoccupied with the role it plays in elevating the Kim family's personality cult, resulting in a missed opportunity to apply Andre Schmid's provocative question, "Is a history of North Korea without Kim [Il Sung] possible?" to the domains of music making, performing, and listening (Schmid 2017). One way to overcome the dominant emphasis on the leaders' roles in guiding music production is to investigate music as part of a set of social processes, critical to the formation of a new society and developing worldview. As Dafna Zur and Susan Hwang point out, "music and the words it carries may galvanize people in acts of protest or acts of complicity; it may foster a sense of collective belonging or heighten feelings of alienation; or it may drive people to engage in new acts of social or material exchange" (Zur and Hwang 2022, 2).

The opening article of the special issue, "Cementing the Sounds of State-Building: Early North Korean Mass Music and Staged Works of Music, 1945–1949" by Peter Moody, captures the aspect of collective belonging by charting the DPRK's path to statehood through its foundational connections to sonic culture. Moody explores the development of early mass music and staged works with music during North Korea's formative years prior to the Korean War, uncovering their pivotal role in shaping the nascent state's identity and ideological orientation. Although it is not entirely a history of North Korean music without Kim Il Sung, it endeavors to document a history of music in North Korea's early period beyond the most discussed work from that era: "Song of General Kim Il Sung" (1946).

Notably, the article seeks to highlight early practices concerning music policy, focusing on how the Korean Workers' Party (KWP, Joseon rodongdang) leveraged marches and mass songs to imbue the populace with routines of collective empowerment, bolstered by evocative depictions of democratic engagement. It further examines the state's efforts to advance what Moody identifies as Great National Classics, which functioned as a symbolic rite of passage to secure recognition and prestige within the Socialist Bloc. Despite the predominantly hierarchical implementation of these initiatives, individual musicians gained prominence by fusing their creative expression with party directives. During the Soviet Civil Administration period (Sobieteu minjeongcheong, 1945–1948), in

particular, North Korean musicians localized transnational musical forms, such as marches and mass songs, reimagining them as vibrant embodiments of enthusiasm for the emerging DPRK state agenda.

Like music, the North Korean filmmaking industry has long been stigmatized for being primarily propagandistic, a perception that has hindered its ability to transcend biases within the global cinematic landscape. As a result, it has struggled to receive acknowledgment and establish itself alongside other national cinemas, failing to attain a desirable status among the echelons of world cinema and remaining underrecognized as an equal among international counterparts. Gabor Sebo and Roman Husarski contribute articles that shed light on this underrepresented realm of world cinema, focusing on the critical reception of North Korean films by film critics and journalists in Cold War-era socialist Hungary and Poland, respectively. These transnational film-critical perspectives, which surpassed the national boundaries of socialist Eastern Europe, also extended to the cultural and regional divides between East and West (Asia and Europe). This dynamic fostered a Eurocentric exotic curiosity toward the isolated Far East regime among Eastern European film journalist comrades. Such a sense of fascination was often fraught with potential misinterpretations due to symbolic cultural differences.

At the same time, various film reviews from the Socialist Bloc in Eastern Europe conveyed a sense of solidarity in decoding and translating early North Korean works, reflecting a degree of support for socialist internationalism. These salutations of camaraderie from the European Socialist Bloc towards North Korean works were positively epitomized in Polish and Hungarian film reviews, at least for a time. However, with the onset of Khrushchev's Thaw, Eastern European filmmakers began experimenting with new cinematic formats influenced by the Italian and French neo-realist trajectories. Emerging in the late 1950s, the Eastern European cinematic New Wave movements took shape and gained momentum. By the 1980s, Eastern European audiences had largely turned away from North Korean cinema. Even the DPRK's most successful film export in the 1980s, the martial arts action-adventure *Hong Gildong* (Kim Gil-in, 1986), which achieved considerable box office success in Poland and Bulgaria, garnered little to no recognition in Hungary.

The second article in this issue, Gabor Sebo's study titled "Far from Flawless Socialist Cinema: Shifting Hungarian Judgments of North Korea's Ceaseless Cinematic Schematism," traces the evolving reception of North Korean cinema by socialist Hungarian film critics over several decades. This evolution of critical reception reflects a palpable shift from the initial glorification of North Korean socialist realist narratives and adaptations of Korean folktale classics, which

appeared in Hungarian film magazines and newspapers in the 1950s, to a growing sense of disillusionment by the mid-to-late 1980s. Initially, in the 1950s, a number of film articles enthusiastically celebrated an unwavering socialist brotherhood, which entailed an interest in North Korean cinema and an emphasis on its steadfast adherence to Soviet socialist realist paradigms. However, this narrative underwent a profound transformation with the rise of the Hungarian New Wave in the 1960s, when Hungarian critics began adopting a more critical stance. They scrutinized the formulaic and repetitive narratives prevalent in North Korean cinema, voicing dissatisfaction with the overt personality cult elements, the pervasive ennui evoked by the films, and their reliance on schematic and predictable tropes. The routinization and persistent inclusion of *de rigueur*, unaltered elements rendered socialist realist formats increasingly obsolete on Hungarian screens. In the 1970s, bolder critical voices addressing North Korean films began to surface in Hungarian newspapers.

Of particular relevance was an evolution in the representation of North Korean films within Hungarian newspapers following the announcement of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies, which shaped the Cold War political and cultural landscape of Eastern Europe. Drawing on archival documents and analytical writings in Hungarian film publications, Sebo's article provides fresh insights into the intersection of the Eastern European cinematic New Wave art scenes and the rigid Juche-realist cinema of the DPRK. The evolving attitudes of Hungarian critics in the 1970s and 1980s, when socialist realist film forms were increasingly dismissed as tedious, outdated political productions, demonstrated more expansive cultural transformations in Eastern Europe during this period. Within these shifting cultural conditions, the Hungarian film community's growing disillusionment with North Korean cinema mirrored the region's broader move toward more innovative and politically critical cinematic expressions.

In the third article, "Films from a Country that Fights for Freedom: An Overview of North Korean Cinema in the Polish People's Republic," Roman Husarski investigates the reception of North Korean films in Poland over several decades. Early reviews were heavily influenced by political propaganda, reflecting a favorable bias, whereas later critiques grappled with finding merit in the films beyond their cultural distinctiveness. Dominant themes—including pro-Soviet alignment, anti-American rhetoric, and narratives of independence—underscored the ideological bond between the two nations, portraying them as fraternal allies guided by the Soviet leadership in a shared struggle against imperialism.

The political shifts following Poland's post-de-Stalinization period rendered North Korea a more contentious subject. The ideological appeal of DPRK

cinema came back only under General Jaruzelski's martial law (1981–1983). In later years, reviewers restricted themselves to reiterating North Korean historiography while emphasizing everything that fit the framework of a magical and mysterious Orient. Husarski's essay not only explores archival film journalism but also analyzes data on audience reception, revealing that while Poles were generally indifferent to overtly politicized content, they were more receptive to entertaining films featuring martial arts and Far Eastern legends. Furthermore, the article highlights the agency of small states within the Soviet Bloc, the interplay of Cold War dynamics, the instrumental treatment of cinema as a tool of soft power, and the ways in which historical and political contexts shaped critical assessments of these films.

The final section of this special issue delves into issues of policy and culture, examining how culture has influenced North Korea's approach to the education of children with disabilities and its youth culture, as was manifested at the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students in 1989. Douglas Gabriel's "Children of the Juche Revolution: Picturing North Korean Youth Culture at the Thirteenth World Festival of Youth and Students" homes in on a mega-event hosted by Pyongyang in 1989 as an ostensible demonstration of North Korea's capacity to accommodate a spectacle equal to or greater than the Olympics, which Seoul had hosted the previous year. The article shows how the stakes of hosting this event, for North Korea, also involved projecting the country's own contemporary relevance in what was conceived by the organizers of the World Festival of Youth and Students as a post-Cold War world order. Attending to the discourse that surrounded the festival, divisive acts that transpired on the ground during the event, and a pair of art exhibitions that were held in conjunction with it, Gabriel argues that North Korea's seemingly anachronistic positioning relative to the global youth movement in fact laid bare tensions that ran through youth organizations worldwide as they strove to define their own timeliness in the contemporary world.

Jasmine Barrett and Keith McVilly's article, "Assessing Access to Education for Children with Disabilities in the DPRK," investigates the state of educational access for children with disabilities in North Korea. Children with disabilities have access to two types of schools in the DPRK: (1) special schools catering to deaf and blind students, and (2) mainstream schools catering to all other students. Based on an analysis of domestic publications and state media reporting on children with disabilities attending school, their research scrutinizes the capacity of special schools to educate the population of deaf and blind children. The authors also analyze the increasing trend of inclusive education, where children with disabilities study with mainstream peers. Integrated education is beginning

to emerge, with special classrooms being set up for children with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Barrett and McVilly's research finds that the special school system for deaf and blind children is well-developed, but that children educated in special schools lack opportunities to interact with non-disabled children, and that their academic achievements are worse than their mainstream peers. The DPRK's current strategy for increasing access to education appears to center on encouraging teachers to perform additional labor to ensure that children with disabilities are not excluded. Systemic support is lacking, so access to education largely relies on the discretion of individual teachers and their willingness to undertake additional responsibilities to accommodate students with diverse learning needs. The authors conclude that the cultural significance of education in North Korea—as both an inherent right and a means of achieving social mobility and economic stability—is reflected in ongoing efforts to improve accessibility. Increasing access to education for children with disabilities does figure on the societal agenda, but completing a transition to inclusive education will remain elusive without further systemic support.

The special issue culminates with a review by Gabor Sebo of Travis Workman's monographic exploration of the “noncomparable” (Workman 2023, 1) national cinemas of the two Koreas, entitled *Political Moods: Film Melodrama and the Cold War in the Two Koreas* (University of California Press, 2023). In this book, Workman focuses specifically on melodrama—an aesthetic code that frequently appeared on both sides of the Korean Peninsula during the apex of the Cold War era (1950–1960). In the first part of the book, Workman scrutinizes North Korean cinema's melodramatic realist mode, analyzing the DPRK's first feature film, socialist realist family melodramas, and folklore films. The second section shifts focus to the South Korean visual melodramatic mode, delving into historical references to the “lost object” (Workman 2023, 117–118), including the nation, authentic Korean identity, and the aspiration for territorial unification.

Amid unrelenting inter-Korean tensions, this special issue of the *Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* unites the expertise of six scholars specializing in North Korean visual culture, music, youth, and disability, offering politically relevant research that engages with underexplored topics, and provides thought-provoking insights that advance both Korean studies and peace and conflict studies. In a world increasingly defined by conflict and division, such scholarship is critical. Understanding the “other”—its mindset, society, culture, and emotional state—represents a foundational step toward rapprochement. It involves recognizing the shared human emotions, feelings, and sentiments that transcend the boundaries of political systems in which individuals are born and live. In these

tumultuous times, fostering such comprehension and understanding is not only significant but indispensable.

The present special issue examines versatile expressions of North Korean identity—including visual, sonic, and performative elements—within the enduring rhetoric and political milieu of the Cold War, while also highlighting how these facets collectively construct an image of a pastoral, protective, and human-centered society. By framing these social and cultural dimensions within Cold War contexts, the articles utilize interdisciplinary methodologies to investigate *North Koreanness* as a distinct national sentiment. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of the intricate, transnational forces shaping North Korea's socio-cultural landscape.

Each contributor extends profound gratitude to Editor-in-Chief Professor John DiMoia and Editorial Assistant Ji Hyun Park for their invaluable support and guidance. Deep gratitude is also extended to the reviewers for their generosity in lending us their time and expertise. Finally, a heartfelt thanks is owed to Professor Sang Hwan Seong for his unwavering trust and steadfast support, both of which have been instrumental to the successful publication of this special issue.

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